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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - September 14,
2005

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled
by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Civil Society

¶2. Opposition Congress Secures Location, But Wants More

Following Lukashenko's instruction to Minsk city
officials to assist the opposition 10+ coalition in
finding a location for its meeting, opposition leader
Aleksandr Bukhvostov announced on September 13 that the
Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus will be held at
the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) Culture Center October
1 and 2. The opposition made additional requests for
assistance on September 14, including asking that the
GOB issue visas to all foreign guests and urging the
state-controlled media to provide unbiased coverage.

¶3. EU Funds Broadcast Program into Belarus

On September 9, the European Commission published a EURO
two million tender to fund independent broadcasting into
Belarus. This two-year program will start in January
2006 and broadcast on radio and television in both
Russian and Belarusian. EC Commissioner Benita Ferrero-
Waldner stated, "The human rights situation in Belarus
is deteriorating, and if the country is to find its way
onto the path to democracy, the people need access to
free media." GOB Ministry spokesman Ruslan Yesin
retorted the project, "represents direct interference in
the domestic matters of a sovereign state."

¶4. GOB Believes UBP Situation Is Not an Ethnic Minority
Problem

On September 8, Director of the EcooM Analytic Center
Sergey Musiyenko reasoned that since ethnic Poles are
actually full-fledged citizens of Belarus, the situation
with the UBP should not be considered an ethnic minority
problem. Musiyenko warned, "the situation around the
UBP is a problem artificially created in order to build
up the influence of the Belarusian opposition." [Note:
EcooM is closely tied to Lukashenko's Presidential
Administration and routinely serves as a regime
mouthpiece.]

¶5. Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hramada (BSDPH)
to Participate in Congress

On September 9, the BSDPH announced it will
participate in the 10+ coalition's single candidate
congress October 1 and 2. The BSDPH is not a member of
the coalition, and hence cannot nominate ten delegates

based on party membership, but wants "to speak to the congress, to express our opinion, talk, discuss and argue." However, a number of local BSDPH chapters participated in the 10+'s local delegate conventions and elected delegates from their party. These people will participate as delegates in the congress. If a single candidate is chosen, BSDPH stated that this person will represent the 10+ coalition, but not the BSDPH.

¶6. Italy 4, Belarus 1

After Italy's football team beat Belarus on September 7 by three goals, Anatoly Baidachny stated that he would not step down as head coach of the Belarusian football team. Baidachny blames the defeat on poor defense and the lack of highly skilled players.

Human Rights

¶7. TIP: An Internal and External Problem for Belarus

On September 14, the Ministry of Interior expressed its concern about the number of Belarusians involved with trafficking of persons (TIP). Since January, the GOB has uncovered 15 TIP cases with 50 victims. Recently, the GOB stymied a proposal from a Member of Parliament to open brothels in Belarus, and expelled the heads of two foreign marriage agencies suspected of involvement in TIP [Note: one was an Amcit, who received assistance from Post]. The latest case concerned ten Belarusian university students who were sent to Turkey to reportedly work as forced labor.

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¶8. GOB Awards Officials for Repression of Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP)

On September 7, Presidential Administration head Victor Sheiman presented awards to several Grodno Oblast officials for "actions to improve stabilization in the sphere of international relations." NGO Charter 97 commented, "there is no doubt that the officials were awarded for the dismissal of the legal administration of the UBP and for pressure on the democratic part of this public organization."

¶9. Belarusian Criminal Law More Humane?

On September 13, MP Alexander Arkhipov commented that Lukashenko's recent decree enabling the head of state to pardon criminals who repent and pay for damages "proves that the Belarusian Criminal Legislation is getting more humane." The decree, however, may also result in an increase in crimes since people will think they have a chance to avoid punishment. It is also a means for Lukashenko to pardon corrupt members of his own government who are caught stealing.

Economics

¶10. More Trade via Kaliningrad, Less via the Baltics

On September 9, the GOB announced that it plans to transship a pilot lot of potassium fertilizer through Russia's Kaliningrad port. The GOB postulates the Kaliningrad port could process up to one million tons of Belarusian cargo annually. Belarus' increased use of the Kaliningrad port could lead to a decrease in the amount of trade via the Baltic ports of Klaipeda and Ventspils.

¶11. Belarus' secret export promotion strategy

On September 9, the Presidium of the Belarusian Council of Ministers approved the 2006 - 2010 draft program to develop Belarus' exports. The program offers two growth rate forecasts: the "base forecast" projects a 57% export growth of up to USD 27 billion, while the "optimistic forecast" predicts 65% growth of up to USD 32 billion. Econoff learned that the details of the report are not accessible to the public and the GOB will not share it with diplomatic missions in Belarus.

Anti-U.S.

¶12. Bush Administration Profits from 9/11

On September 12, Belarusian State TV accused the Bush Administration of profiting from September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war in Iraq. The reporter and several Russian Duma members claimed that President Bush destroyed Iraq and then granted permission to "select" companies to rebuild it using the taxpayers' money.

¶13. Katrina Exposes U.S. Weakness

On September 9 (and several times subsequently), pro-state Belarusian media used Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina to try to discredit the USG. Belarusian military newspaper Vo Slavu Rodny compared the inadequate U.S. response to Katrina (delays in aid, inability of the military to regain control, etc.) with the GOB's successful response to "Hurricane Chernobyl", which the paper described as "very effectively [handled] and in an organized way." On September 15 Ruslan Yesin, Spokesman for the MFA, announced Belarus remains ready to send assistance to the U.S., "despite the fact that the country is still dealing with the aftermath of the hurricane that hit Belarus in August." [Note: moderately high winds knocked down many trees in Belarus on August 9.]

International Relations

¶14. Lukashenko Invites Castro to Belarus

On September 12, Lukashenko extended an invitation to Cuban President Fidel Castro to visit Belarus. Lukashenko stated, "We would receive him with pleasure as an intimate and good friend." Post understands that

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Venezuelan leader Chavez will also make a visit to Belarus by the end of the year.

¶15. Belarus Parliament Wants Cooperation with NATO

After being suspended from associate membership in 1997, the Belarusian parliament announced on September 13 that it is ready to establish mutually beneficial relations with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Belarusian MP Nikolai Cherginets made very clear, however, that the GOB seeks only cooperation with NATO and not associate member status. Cherginets and the parliament also denounced plans to discuss Belarus in the NATO PA.

Quote of the Week

¶16. Presidential Administration staffer Eduard Skobelev offered his opinion on the Belarusian opposition in Belarus' main state newspaper, Sovetskaya Belarus, on September 14:

"These chicken-hearted clandestine agents of chaos and destruction are enjoying enormous support.... Many foreign parties are babbling day and night about the lack of 'democracy', 'true European initiatives' and 'Atlantic solidarity' in Belarus.... They are trying to turn the Belarusian people into zombies, implanting the idea of a revolution in them."

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